The Role of Cultural Influences in Japanese Communication: A Literature Review on Social and Situational Factors and Japanese Indirectness

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One of the distinguishing characteristics of Japanese communication is the use of what are often perceived to be ambiguous expressions, silence and/or lack of explanation, frequent use of hesitation and pauses, laughter and smiling (when they might seem inappropriate), and the use of honorific and humble forms. A review of the existing literature demonstrates the purpose, meaning, and significance of these features. These features constitute an important aspect of Japanese communication.

Keywords: Japanese, communication, features, ambiguity

Introduction

Communication across cultural boundaries is difficult. Misunderstandings occur even among close neighbors. Japan, even though it has a well-known culture, has a relatively unique and misunderstood communication system in comparison to systems in other countries. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Japanese communication that results in the perceived difficulty is the use of ambiguous expressions. In addition to discussing these features of ambiguity, this paper will also attempt to answer whether the Japanese prefer to use ambiguous and indirect communication, or whether factors within Japanese culture oblige them to do so.

Conventional views, such as those developed by Grice (1975), regard efficient communication as that which self-evidently conforms to the cooperative principle. In order to serve this function, Grice posits the existence of four "maxims," namely, "Give the right amount

of information.　Be truthful.　Be relevant.　Be clear and orderly."
Similarly, in the chapter "Ideologies of Discourse," Scollon and
Scollon (1995, p. 94) state that the philosophy behind communication
is that it "should be conveyed as clearly, briefly, directly, and sincerely
as possible."　Anyone who knows about Japanese communication
practices would agree that, often, these basic premises cannot be
properly applied to the Japanese.　While it is true that similar kinds
of communication strategies are used in most cultures (i.e., across
cultures), what might be different is the way in which communicative
situations are established within cultures.　This study will attempt to
provide an overview of a set of culturally meaningful communication
features found in Japanese such as silence ambiguous expressions,
hesitations (including pause), laughter (including smiling), and the use
of honorific and humble forms.　This study will further investigate
the purpose, meaning and significance of these features.

I.　How the Japanese Perceive their Communication

Barnlund's (1975, pp. 48–52) analysis of the perceptions of Japanese
people regarding their own communicative practices utilized a "Role
Description Checklist," which provided a set of thirty adjectives (four
new terms were added afterwards) to describe the attributes a person
displays in relations with other people.　Subjects were asked to read
the entire list of adjectives and then to select the five words that "best
describe what Japanese are like in talking to each other."　A total of
122 Japanese college students completed the form.　The results indi-
cated that the respondents viewed themselves (in order) as "reserved,"
"formal," "cautious," and "evasive." These terms were chosen by
more than half of the respondents. The frequency with which each of
the terms was selected as descriptive of communicative characteristics
of Japanese is indicated on Table 1 (see Appendix A).　Similar
qualities are shown in a comparison of the communication systems of
American and Japanese corporations as shown in Table 2 (see Appen-

dix B).　Other sources of information on Japanese communicative characteristics appear to confirm the results reported here.

In a follow-up study (Barnlund, 1975, pp. 57–58), Japanese students were asked to formulate ten statements that best described their personal modes of interacting with others.　Under the heading, "What I am like in interpersonal relations," they commented along the following lines: "I try to behave according to my role and circumstance," "I try to be as polite as possible," "I pretend to be calm and cool, even when I am not," "I rarely show my true self," "I don't say all of what I think," and so forth.　Such qualities as "silent," "reserved" and "evasive" reflect in the Japanese communication philosophy, as he claimed.

II.　The Use of, and Preference for Silence as Communication

Silence is one of the communicative features that results from the imperatives above.　In this context, silence can be defined not only as the absence of sound, but also as a culturally grounded part of communication. Thus, Ishii and Bruneau (1988, p. 310) point out:

> Most people throughout the world experience some form of silence.　However, the manner in which people's attitudes become socially and culturally disposed toward silence may be dramatically different in different cultural groups.　North American societies, for example, are so involved in linear progression that even flashes of silence are filled with action and doing.　In these cultures, silence is viewed as dark, negative, and full of "no things" — all of which are considered socially undesirable.

Accordingly, silence can be interpreted in radically different ways (Saville-Troike, 1985, p. 9).　The following extract, taken from Williams (1979), is illustrative:

A: Are you still mad at me?
B: [Silence] (affirmative)

According to Williams, in Japanese society it would have been considered unnecessary for B to respond in the positive, as silence implies affirmation.　Nwoye (1978), however, reveals that the same exchange would have very different implications between Igbo speakers, who would tend to interpret silence as denial if the interlocutor remained present.　In other cultures, such as Igbo, silence may be considered uncommunicative, whereas in the Japanese context it is a significant mode of communication.　Clearly, silence can be interpreted in other cultures in a slightly different way than in the Japanese.　This difference, although small, may be a potential problem area when it comes to cross-cultural communication.

A.　The significance of silence

What is the significance of silence? As Tannen (1985, p. 97) suggests, silence is not simply the absence of talk, but rather, "the extreme manifestation of indirectness.　If indirectness is a matter of saying one thing and meaning another, silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something."

Lebra (1993) also demonstrates that silence is a semantically rich resource for communication for the Japanese.　Ishii (1984, p. 65, citing Kunihiro) states many Japanese place a high value on silence, i.e., "To the Japanese, language is a means of communication, whereas to the people of many other cultures it is the means."

B.　The Japanese preference for silence

In emphasizing the non-verbal aspect of Japanese communication, Ruch (1984, p. 65) observes that:

> If given a choice, the Japanese would prefer not to use words.　A Japanese proverb says, "not to say is better than to say." To the Japanese, non-verbal communication is often more important than verbal communication.　For them, the verbal message accompanies the nonverbal cues instead of the other way around, as

in other cultures. The Japanese, Bairy explains, keep a "constant alertness to the ambient milieu through a steady communication and exchange." Kawabata Yasunari, Japan's Nobel Prize winning novelist, has said that the Japanese communicate through unspoken understanding, a type of telepathy, because for them truth is in the implicit rather than in the stated. The Japanese call it "*ishin-denshin* — communication by the heart."

In fact, Yasunari's masterpiece, *The Sound of the Mountain* seems to show this passion for silence.   According to Miyoshi (1974), the silence in his work "resonates with meaning." It should be noted, however, that the employment of silence in literary works is not a distinctive feature of Japan, but can be found in many cultures around the world.

In Japanese corporations, as in Japanese life generally, nonverbal communication between two or more people is constant.   Many important aspects of Japanese life are rarely, if ever, verbalized. Morsbach explains that "even if verbalizing something, there is often a large element of understatement, and silence is valued for its powers of communication." Words are often considered unnecessary to Japanese when Americans feel the need for lengthy explanations.

For Ruch this manifests itself in "a positive mistrust of verbal skills," which are considered inferior to non-verbal forms of communication (1984, p. 66).

III.   Negative Views Held by the Japanese toward Communication

Ishii and Klopf (1990) found that the typical university students reported negative self-images with regard to their communicative abilities in oral encounters, especially when dealing with strangers. Resultant aversion to oral communications also resulted in an inclination to prefer nonverbal means of communication.   Other evidence

supports the argument that the Japanese have negative attitudes towards speaking.　Katayama (1982), for example, analyzed 504 Japanese proverbs on the values of language and found that only 124 (25%) of the proverbs had conveyed positive values towards language, while 320 (63%) had conveyed negative values and 59 (12%) were neutral (Ishii, 1988, p. 312).　Two examples of negative proverbs are *kuchi wa wazawai no moto* which literally means "the mouth is the gate of misfortune" and *iwanu ga hana* which translates as "what is not said is flowers," in other words "many things are better left unsaid." A similar meaning can be imputed to the well-known *haiku* verse which has become a proverb: *mono ieba kuchibiru samushi aki no kaze*.　That is to say, "When I speak, my lips are lonely as the autumn wind." Ishikawa's survey results regarding businessmen and businesswomen in Tokyo (cited in Ishii, 1988, p. 312) also revealed that "men should or need to be silent to be successful in life and (b) 65% of businesswomen would prefer to marry silent males."

IV.　The Japanese "No"

The following observation illustrates the use of negation in Japanese:

> If the Japanese tend to avoid direct questions, they tend to avoid direct answers.　This is especially the case if the answer is "no." "No" is one of the few Japanese words which, after it has been learned, is avoided in actual conversation . . . .　Ueda found the Japanese employ sixteen different ways of avoiding the necessity of saying "no." Silence, indirectness and ambiguous replies were all used to avoid expressing negative feelings rather than verbalizing them. (Barnlund, 1975, p. 136)

For Ishii (1984), ambiguity and vagueness also play an important role in Japanese communication. "Instead the Japanese, as Imai states . . . prefer 'subtle, implicit, open-ended, obscure understatement'." Imai (cited in Ruch, 1984, p. 66) lists the following ways Japanese can

communicate "no" while indicating "yes: "

> The first, and perhaps most typical, way to imply no is to say yes and then to follow this with an explanation which may last half an hour and which, in effect means no . . . The second way is to imply no is to be so vague, ambiguous and evasive in reply that the other side loses track of what the issue was . . . The third way is simply not to answer the question and to leave the matter unattended.   . . . Other ways include abruptly hanging the subjects, criticizing the other party, or suddenly assuming a highly apologetic tone.

Klopf states the Japanese are much more reluctant to express their ideas and feelings clearly, and this may be because they fear that they might damage the atmosphere of interpersonal harmony in the situation, thereby avoiding unnecessary confrontations that may come about from careless conversation.   "In their close-knit groups, the members couch themselves in silence and ambiguous expressions, . . . " (Klopf, 1991, p. 137). Ruch supports the view that vagueness is a virtue and he argues that, for Japanese, being vague equates with being humble and courteous.

V.   The Use of Hesitation and Pause in Japanese Communication

The phenomenon of the frequent use of hesitation and pause is also an interesting example of Japanese communication.   Hesitation and pause are related in the sense that there are only marginal differences between the two (Walker, 1985, p. 65).   According to O'Conell and Kowal (1983, p. 221), what is generally referred to as simply "pause" is a period of silence in the speech of the person.   Many hesitations are attributable to the speaker's need to focus in the conversation. Others stem from the need to find the best way to verbalize when the topic of conversation shifts from one point of focus to another.

Different communication systems display different forms of hesita-

tion.　Types of hesitation range from complete silence to lengthened continual sound to pauses filled by hesitation fillers. In Japanese, hesitation fillers are numerous.　They include, but are not limited to, *a, ja, sa, eto, ano, sono* (Neustupný, 1987, p. 149).　The end of an utterance can, also, include an indication of hesitation.　Except in situations where the speaker is not quite sure what to say, too much hesitation creates a difficult situation for the listener (who becomes easily distracted).　On the other hand, to speak without any hesitation, which, as Neustupný (1987) points out, many older foreign textbooks teaching Japanese instruct, produces a strange effect likely only to draw attention to the foreignness of the speaker.

VI.　Hesitation as a Necessary Condition for Politeness

　Hesitation can also be one of the ways that the Japanese can show that the speaker is being polite to the interlocutor. Japanese people tend to see hesitation and indirectness as signs of politeness, and these qualities are especially useful when talking to someone of a higher status. This feature is apparent in the following example of an interaction between a teacher and a student (as transcribed by Mizutani and Mizutani, 1987, p. 33). Underlining has been added to illustrate periods of hesitation.

　　S = student　　T = teacher
　　S: *Ano,* [hesitation filler] *sensei*.　　　　[Er, excuse me, teacher.]
　　T: *Hai*.　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[Yes?]
　　S: *Oisogashii tokoro osorei irimasuga*.　　[I'm terribly sorry to trouble you when you're very busy, but.]
　　T: *Iya*.　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[No.]
　　S: *Kono sakubun no koto nandesu kedo*.　[Well, this is about

		my composition.]
T:	*Hai.*	[Yes.]
S:	*Chotto naoshite itadake masendeshooka.*	[Would you mind correcting it?]

Corresponding with Japanese discourse conventions, the student's deference before the teacher is signaled through hesitation and indecision. Gudykunst (1993, p. 100) reports, however, that when Mizutani and Mizutani reproduced the conversation in English and asked American respondents their impressions of the student, they frequently remarked on his inarticulate way of communicating with the teacher. Subjects in that study indicated that hesitation was not appropriate in this context. For Mizutani and Mizutani, however, directness in the Japanese context would appear aggressive, while the use of hesitation and pause allows the speaker to proceed with his or her speech while waiting for the listener's reactions.

VII.   The Use of Laughter in Japanese Communication

One stereotype may suggest that the Japanese do not show their emotions, and so they do not laugh very much, but, in fact, they do. Few cross-cultural studies have attempted to analyze the communicative function of laughter in Japan, and, therefore, the following reflections should be considered highly speculative.   In the following discussion laughter and smiling will be grouped together because "smiling resembles laughter, except that it is unaccompanied by voice" (Neustupný, 1987, p. 138). Consider the following example of the Japanese use of laughter and smiling.   The excerpt is from an English interview test between Midori, a female Japanese student, and a native English-speaking interviewer.   The example suggests some of the functions of laughter in Japanese discourse.

I = interviewer M = Midori

I: What part-time job did you have?

M: <laugh> I had many, quite a lot of part-time job. Once I was . . . a waitress in the restaurant and . . . at the same time I, I was a telephonist. <laugh>

I: Not twenty-one?

M: <laugh> Because we have a day when we are twenty.

I: Really?

M: Yeah. <laugh> We call it Adult Day. When we have this day, everybody wear kimono and for boys everyone wear suits, oh, kind of kimono for men. <laugh>

I: And do you like to wear traditional Japanese clothes, for example?

M: Er <laugh>for example, Yeah?

I: Do you like dresses?

M: Dresses . . . mmm. Yes. <laugh>

I: Yes. You're playing tennis, yeah? Not watching.

M: No not watching. <laugh>

(excerpts from the transcription of Cambridge First Certificate in English, oral interview, 1991, Cambridge, England)

This excerpt indicates that Midori employs laughter in many instances both before stating an idea and after. In English, as well as many other languages, the employment of a laugh at these moments probably would sound inappropriate. Indeed, to those familiar with different communication systems, Midori's laughter may sound out of place.

A total of 170 university students were asked to listen to the tape. They were asked whether they would laugh in the same way in the

indicated situation or if this would be possible in their daily communication. The result was that 66% (74% of the females, 62% of the males) of the students answered "yes" or "possible." The reasons were (in order) "to alleviate the tension" and, surprisingly, " to make a good impression."

Given such findings, it could be that Midori's use of laughter is a strategy designed to mediate feelings of shame surrounding her English ability. However, Midori's use of laughter may also be representative of how Japanese use laughter in a variety of social and cultural settings. Midori's laughter, then, is a language feature influenced by her cultural perspective.

VIII.   Possible Reasons for Japanese Employment of Laughter

Why do the Japanese laugh at times when it would seem inappropriate in another system of communication? One reason may lie in the fact that the Japanese place a great importance on the sense of shame and on considering what one would do if the listener interpreted a given utterance in particular way. Laughter is thus used to express the speaker's fear of feeling awkward or nervous while expressing himself or herself. One of the reasons Midori may have laughed before an utterance is that she felt worried that what she was about to say would be misinterpreted. She may have laughed after an utterance as a hedge, in case what she just said has been misunderstood. Laughing thus serves to minimize embarrassment and act as a self-defense mechanism.

In addition to the possibility that laughter in these contexts represents an expression of what Brown and Levinson (1978) describe as "ego preserving wants," it can also be viewed as a negative politeness strategy which utilizes nonverbal cues. This type of laughter usually occurs when the listener is superior to the speaker and when the speaker and the listener are not very familiar with each other. This is similar to the use of negative politeness between Japanese people to

keep good relationships or to alleviate the tension in unfamiliar situations or between people of different social standings. It is also related to the strategy shown in the situation where a Japanese speaker will offer apologies even when he or she is not in the wrong. These nonverbal cues may, however, create an adverse effect. If the listener (even if he or she was Japanese and familiar with this type of laughter) did not perceive this laughter as a form of politeness, the speaker would be regarded as a rude person or a mere idiot . . . far from making a good impression.

Occasionally, we do laugh when alone, but most often we share the laughter. However, the type of laughter which seems to be used more frequently by the Japanese compared to some other cultures and that is represented by Midori's case is not the kind of laughter to be enjoyed with others nor is it an invitation to laugh. This type of laughter is not socially oriented, but serves a different function, e.g., as a defense mechanism.

IX. The Japanese Honorific and Humble Forms

Some studies have attempted to show that the aforementioned discourse features signify politeness. In reality, however, they may be no more than self-defense and survival strategies in a society which promotes the need to maintain harmony. This view is supported by the use of the honorific and humble forms usually categorized as polite language. These forms are virtually absent in English, but central to Japanese discourse.

A. The honorific, or *keigo*

The Japanese honorific system (*keigo*) can be subcategorized according to Hendry's (1993) taxonomy: *sonkeigo* (respect language), *kenjoogo* (deferent language), and *teineigo* (polite language). *Keigo* is also, however, context (as opposed to status), dependent insofar as the need for respect or humility changes in relation to the addressee.

Mizutani (1987, p. 12) offers an interesting illustration, i.e., the absence of a company manager is likely to be reported differently to those making internal phone calls than those calling from outside: *Yamada shachoo wa gaishutsu sarete imasu,* or "President Yamada is out" as opposed to *Yamada wa gaishutsu shite imasu*, or "Yamada is out" (when speaking to someone outside the company). The honorific dimension of this sentence is dependent upon a complex perception of the role of discourse participants which could easily be misunderstood by those who are unfamiliar with such socio-cultural dimensions.

B. The use of the honorific and humble forms as defensive stances

Politeness may be communicated through both the medium of the honorific and the humble forms. However, they are also a feature of the preliminary exchanges in martial arts and other sporting contests. In this context, *keigo* may be described as a form of rhetorical protection from suppressed emotions, and a means of establishing metaphorical distance between combatants and the potentially threatening engagement. By extension, the "battle" metaphor associated with such discourse could be applied to social interaction between individuals seeking to gain advantage in struggles for ascendance in more or less formal hierarchies of status and prestige. For Neustupny (1987), particularly among women, *keigo* is used in this context as a means of assessing personal factors such as upbringing and education, and those who wish to impress others in this respect pay special attention to its use.

Keigo is also a means by which people demonstrate linguistic refinery or present an outward persona which conceals less positive personality traits in the interest of facilitating communication (Hendry, 1993). Furthermore, it can be used purposely in speech acts intended to repel unwelcome interlocutors. For example, door-to-door salespersons are routinely discouraged in highly respectful lan-

guage forms such as: *"taihen moushiwake gozaimasenga tadaima torikonde orimasunode ohikitori itadake masen deshouka,"* literally: "I am terribly sorry, but I am much too occupied.   Would you mind if you would leave?" The level of politeness conveyed may be somewhat untranslatable in English, but in Japanese, such utterances are considered highly polite, in spite of being frequently accompanied by prosodic features intended to intensify their force (Hendry, 1993).

C.   Conventions in humble forms

An analysis of humble forms is also revealing.   In conventional expressions used during the exchange of gifts, for example, the giver plays down the value of the object, even if it is an object of great value, saying to the recipient, "it's not worth having, but . . . " Similar expressions are also used with dinner guests before serving a meal (Hendry, 1993).

Such utterances are understood entirely in symbolic terms to such a degree that they would generally be avoided in situations where the gift is considered genuinely minor, or when a snack is offered.   For Hendry (1993), such utterances, rather than acting as a display of modesty and self-effacement, in fact have the function of articulating forms of hidden power.   Similarly, Japanese politeness is such that most foreigners studying Japanese are led to believe that they are doing much better at the language than they usually are, while, as they develop greater fluency, they are less likely to encounter praise.

X.   The Japanese Idea of "Wrapping" Related to Communication

There is a subtle aspect of Japanese culture that is related to all of these communication features which may help to explain them.   As Lebra points out, Hendry (1993) identifies the idea of "wrapping" as essential to Japanese culture. "This term encompasses a wide range of communicative symbols and signs . . . These include: elaborate gift-

wrapping of candy, tea and any other gift-object; body-wrapping as in the ancient court dress, *junihitoe*, literally meaning 'twelve-layered' dress for court ladies; linguistic-wrapping like *keigo*" (Lebra, 1993, p. 76). This comprehensive idea of wrapping brings to light the relationship between self and communication.   It can be said that the Japanese communication style is a device in which to wrap up the self; this necessitates the features discussed above.   Can this wrapping be considered a form of self-defense? Barnlund (1975) discusses the "Japanese defensiveness" and suggests that perhaps many Americans perceive such defensiveness in the Japanese as self-withholding. It is by questioning this preconception that we begin to unravel what is hidden behind the "wrapped-up" Japanese self.

XI.   Relating Japanese Communication Features to Additional Cultural Aspects

After examining the Japanese communication characteristics of silence, ambiguous expression, hesitation and pause, laughter and smiling, and, finally, the honorific and humble forms, we can come to the conclusion that they can be mainly attributed to the Japanese trait of indirectness.   This is an interesting conclusion because indirectness in this case is culturally influenced.   We must, therefore, take a look at features of Japanese culture themselves in order to better understand how these features influence the communication system. The aspects of Japanese culture which come into play the most, and from which the above mentioned features originate, are the concepts of *amae, haji, tatemae* and *honne*. We will review discussions of these concepts to better understand the Japanese structures which preserve the communication system.

A.   The concept of *amae*

The Anatomy of Dependence by Takeo Doi (1971), was notable for its application of the concept of *amae* (mutual dependence) to the

character of Japanese society. While the incorporation of the concept into Western culture is limited in scope, the incorporation of the concept by Japanese culture is extensive. Murakami and Seidensticker (1977, p. 85) were thus able to conclude that, for Doi, "*amae* is a key concept for the understanding not only of the Japanese mental structure but of the structure of Japanese society."

In Doi's view *amae* is "a psychological device by which to dent the inexorable fact of separation and sublimate its pain. When the psychology of *amae* dominates a person, we can infer that it conceals feelings of conflict and anxiety over separation" (Murakami and Seidensticker, 1977, p. 86). Doi asserts that as the child grows into adulthood, *amae* is necessary for healthy development and, ultimately, in maintaining mental health. While this developmental process may be universal, it is the Japanese who have "developed the psychology of *amae* in every aspect of mental life. They have created many words expressing variations upon it, so much so that we can speak of Japanese society as 'the world of *amae*'" (Murakami and Seidensticker, 1977, p. 86).

B.   The Japanese sense of shame

Haji, or a sense of shame, is also said to form the core of the Japanese mentality. This concept spread when the anthropologist Ruth Benedict classified Japanese culture as a "shame culture," as opposed to the Western "guilt culture." According to this classification, in Western countries the moral standard of guilt forms the principle of people's behavior. In Japan, however, behavior is not ruled by any inner principle, but by an external feeling of shame. Benedict (1946, p. 224) explained that, from the point of view of those in Western societies:

> we do not expect shame to do the heavy work of morality. We do not harness the acute personal chagrin which accompanies shame to our fundamental system of morality. The Japanese

> do.   A failure to follow their explicit signposts of good behavior, a failure to balance obligations or to foresee contingencies is a shame (haji).   Shame, they say, is the root of virtue.   A man who is sensitive to it will carry out all the rules of good behavior. 'A man who knows shame' is sometimes translated 'virtuous man,' sometimes 'a man of honor.'

Imahori and Cupach's study (1991) on perceptions of embarrassing situations revealed that American respondents most frequently re-called "accidents," while Japanese counterparts referred instead to "mistakes."   They also found that Americans favored humor as a coping strategy, while Japanese counterparts preferred remediation.   A further study also indicated that embarrassment manifested itself in feelings of stupidity among American respondents, while their Japa-nese counterparts reported feeling shame.   For example, if a Japanese person spilled a drink at a party, they would most likely think they had made a mistake and blame themselves for the spilt drink; whereas an American would most likely see it as an accident, feel a little embar-rassed and then make a joke about the whole incident (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 165).

In relation to this observation, a British friend of mine speculated on the importance of concepts of blame, denial, confession and for-giveness in what she referred to as "Anglo" culture. She asserted that, as a result, it is difficult to say that one is sorry and admit being wrong because there is so much involved, and power relationships are seri-ously implicated.   Instead, there is a tendency to self-criticism and irony: "Oh, I'm always doing that," "I suppose it might be a good idea to turn the machine on" as opposed to "I'm sorry I did that," and "Oh, I forgot to turn the machine on."

C.   The Japanese concealment of self

Miyanaga (1991, p. 89) provides an understanding of the Japanese concept of *tatemae* and *honne* as follows:

Honne is what a person really wants to do, and tatemae is his or her submission to moral obligation. Interaction rituals begin with mutual expressions that are culturally prescribed when two parties meet; they develop from occasional (i.e., formal) to frequent (i.e., intimate) exposure of honest feelings. Their particularities of the moral basis of interaction rituals is socially established and agreed upon. Honest feelings, however, are by definition, personal. Premature expression of honest expectations can incite a strongly negative response from the other person in the relationship.

Hendry (1993) also discusses this concept. He explains that the ability to adjust runs alongside the necessity to always make distinctions between the front (*tatemae,* also called *omote*) appropriate for a particular situation and the real opinions (*honne,* also called *ura*) which lie behind it. The degree to which the *omote* deceives anyone depends on the skill of the speaker. For, according to Doi, Japanese people know very often what the *honne* is in any given situation, despite the formal expressions of *tatemae*. He suggests that *omote* is precisely what expresses the *ura* that lies behind it, so that when people look at *omote* they see also the *ura* through it. Indeed, they may be "looking at *omote* solely in order to see *ura*" (Doi, 1986, p. 26).

Such conventions may in turn relate to the geographical, demographic and historical situation of Japan, in which civil strife and relative isolation have combined with a high population density to intensify the need for internal cohesion.

D. The stereotype of politeness

Despite all these variations, there may be the same values lying behind the aforementioned features, which are universally shared but conveyed by different modes of communication. Japanese and other cultures may both attach special importance to the same values (e.g., politeness, sociability or empathy), but they might communicate it differently. Despite all the previous information, there continues to

exist a stereotype that Japanese society is extremely polite.   It seems that the acceptance of the existing distance between those communicating is the basic characteristic of politeness.   Brown and Levinson (1978) claimed universality of the concept of "negative face" and the notion that a higher level of indirectness necessarily reflects greater social distance between interlocutors, and is always perceived as being more polite.

> By greeting someone, we acknowledge the fact that we know that person (i.e., we indicate our proximity to him/her); by being considerate in raising delicate topics, we acknowledge the right of other people for privacy (i.e., we respect their right to remain distant from us); by using the polite form of address, we may communicate our acceptance of the seniority of the person (i.e., we acknowledge a greater distance in terms of status).   In any case, to be polite means to communicate a particular type of content: politeness.   Hence, we could conclude that the consideration of politeness is a matter of content rules, and not the skill of manipulating the devices. (Murakami and Seidensticker, 1977, p. 116)

XII.   The Practical Impact of Japanese Communication Features

These notes on Japanese communication features constitute a review regarding the current literature.   Nevertheless, there remains a need for explicit research into Japanese communication as it has been researched up to now, which might also shed light on the validity of, for example, stereotypes of communication.   Future research should also be informed initially by the need for misunderstandings to be analyzed by people affected by them, and for them to be interviewed in greater depth and in increasing numbers, with a view to asking what kinds of problems people experience across a range of cross-cultural encounters, as well as those between Japanese and Americans, many of whom rely on oral language to convey their messages.   A re-

examination of traditional and perhaps stereotypical Japanese communication may also help to establish if and how behavior is (or is not) changing as a result of new modes of communication mediated by technologies such as computers and cellular phones. A more thorough examination of those problems which result from communicative misunderstandings, in other words, rather than conventional descriptive approaches may also serve to indicate how misunderstandings rooted in linguistic and cultural difference continue to stifle communication in business, education, and other areas of society, both within and outside Japan.

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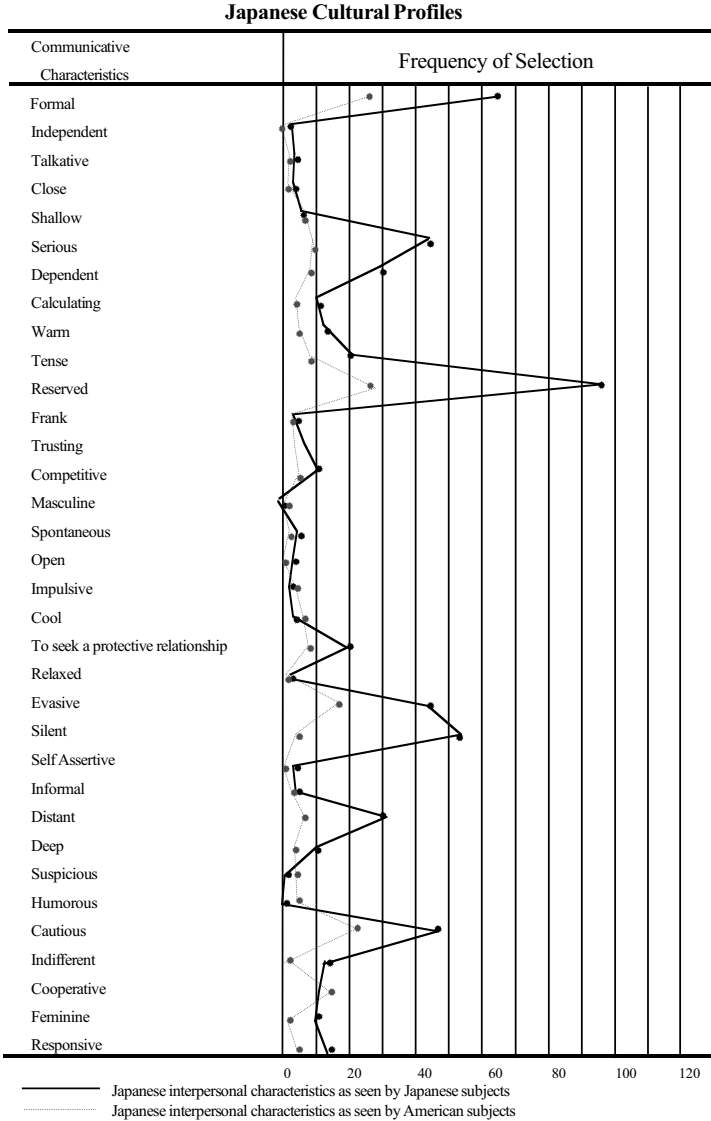
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Appendix A   Table 1

Source: Adapted from Barnland (1975, p.56)

Japanese Cultural Profiles

Communicative Characteristics	Frequency of Selection

Formal
Independent
Talkative
Close
Shallow
Serious
Dependent
Calculating
Warm
Tense
Reserved
Frank
Trusting
Competitive
Masculine
Spontaneous
Open
Impulsive
Cool
To seek a protective relationship
Relaxed
Evasive
Silent
Self Assertive
Informal
Distant
Deep
Suspicious
Humorous
Cautious
Indifferent
Cooperative
Feminine
Responsive

0   20   40   60   80   100   120

——— Japanese interpersonal characteristics as seen by Japanese subjects
·········· Japanese interpersonal characteristics as seen by American subjects

Appendix B Table 2

Comparison of Internal Communication in Japanese and American Corporations

Japan	America
Purpose of communication to transmit information and provide emotional massage	Purpose of communication to transmit information
Strong system of informal communication	Strong system of formal communication
Strong upward communication	Strong downward communication
Strong horizontal communication	Weak horizontal communication
Nonverbal communication an important part of message	Nonverbal communication almost totally ignored
Prefer indirect communication	Prefer direct communication
Strong group-nurturing system of decision making by consensus	Nurturing of individuals
Meetings frequent and long	Fewer and shorter meetings
Prefer compromise and conciliation at meetings	Invite confrontation at meetings
Communication shorthand established by long-term associations	High mobility of employees eliminates communication shorthand
Communication by personal contact	Communication by paper work